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Human Geography of Post-Socialist Mountain Regions

An Introduction

Matthias Schmidt

- 1 The political situation during the so-called Cold War divided alpine and mountain research in at least two sections. From a Western perspective, knowledge about the mountains located behind the iron curtain was very limited due to restricted access and the fact that studies conducted by colleagues from socialist countries were rarely available, written in a non-Western language or just ignored. With the 1989/91 transformation, the numerous mountain ranges in Eurasia, such as the Slovenian Alps, Carpathians, Ural, Caucasus, Altay, Tian Shan, Pamir, Sayan or Kamchatka also came into focus and gained greater attention within the international scientific community. This resulted in numerous studies from various disciplinary backgrounds on physical and socio-economic aspects of the mountain areas in former socialist countries.
- 2 Although several of these studies deal with the socialist past and the post-socialist present, there are rarely studies that explicitly point out the particularities of post-socialism in relation to mountain areas (cf. Badenkov 1990; Steimann 2011; Dörre 2014; Kotlyakov *et al.* 2014). Thus, the question arises, in which way do post-socialist mountain regions differ from mountains in other world regions; in terms of land management, livelihoods, conservation, political governance, or scientific considerations. Are there any particularities that could be labelled as post-socialist, post-communist or post-Soviet? How do the legacies (physical and institutional) of socialist systems influence environments and societies in these mountain areas today?
- 3 There is no doubt that the political, economic and social systems of party-ruled state socialism significantly influenced the way mountains are perceived and valued, managed and utilized. The specific forms of administration, economic exploitation, ideals of preservation and recreation, social restructuring and state control, collectivization, forced sedentarisation or security requirements, all of these forces and activities have shaped the specific mountainous regions. However, this does not mean that the other, maybe more influencing factors such as climate change, transnational co-operations or

globalization processes that permeate all mountain areas in the world, should be neglected. This special issue aims to identify specific features found in the mountains of former socialist states in fields such as resource management, nature conservation, livelihood strategies and tourism that have been characterized as post-socialist.

Mountains of the (post)socialist sphere

- 4 This issue focuses on mountain areas that belong, territorially, to states which followed a socialist doctrine. But to draw a clear line and to define which states fall under this category is more difficult than it seems. During the so-called Cold War the categorical division of the world usually followed a partition into three worlds: the First World included the market economies of North America, Europe and others, the Second World referred to socialist countries while the figuration of the Third World included non-aligned countries and almost all countries with a colonial past. But the definition of the Second World, e.g. the Soviet Union and its allies, was insufficient and no definite list of countries belonging to the Second World existed. It is a fact that a significant number of countries experimented with socialism for shorter or longer periods. Consequently, mountain ranges such as the Ethiopian Highlands, the Truong Son in Vietnam and Laos, the highlands of Tanzania or the High Atlas of Algeria as well as all mountain ranges of the PR China and North Korea also fall under the umbrella of belonging to former or current socialist states. Here, however, we follow a more narrow definition of (post)socialism which is why the aforementioned mountain areas are not covered in this issue.
- 5 Rather, the focus is on mountain ranges in the UN's so-called *Economies in Transition*, which is more or less in congruence with the territory of the Soviet dominated *Council for Mutual Economic Assistance* (CoMEcon). These include Central and East European transition economies (Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Kosovo) and all successor states of the former Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan) as well as Mongolia. In other contexts these countries are labelled as *Central and Eastern Europe* (CEE). For the sake of simplicity, however, the term *Eurasia* will be used in this editorial. In a literal sense, Eurasia includes the whole landmass of Europe and Asia. But in current political and social sciences, the term Eurasia is mainly used to focus on the area from Central Europe eastwards, mainly Eastern Europe and the northern part of Asia. This is reflected by journals such as *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* or *Eurasian Journal of Anthropology*. Therefore, for practical and stylistic reasons, the term Eurasia is used here simultaneously with the UN category *Economies in Transition*.
- 6 Several large mountain ranges fall within the defined area of Eurasia; from the Slovenian Alps in the West to the Verchochansk in the very Far East, including the Carpathians, Ural, Caucasus, Tian Shan, Pamir and Altay as the most prominent mountain ranges. Mount Elbrus (5642 m), Pik Lenin (7134 m), Jengish Chokusu (formerly Pik Pobeda, 7439 m), and Pik Ismoil Somoni (formerly Pik Communism, 7495 m) are some of the tallest mountain peaks. The ecology of the Eurasian mountains is as diverse as the number and dimension of these mountain ranges. Mixed coniferous and broad-leaved forests, xerophytous subtropical forests, shrubs and grasslands, steppe zones and mountain

deserts, sub-alpine and alpine formations as well as nival-glacial landscapes and polar mountain permafrost deserts are found in Eurasian mountain territories (Badenkov 1992; Körner, Spehn 2002). Important rivers that serve as lifelines for millions of people have their origin in these mountain ranges such as the Vistula, Ural, Syr Darya and Amu Darya, in addition to the majestic Siberian rivers Irtysh, Ob, Yenisei, Lena and Amur.

- 7 Although large parts of the Eurasian mountains are almost uninhabited, in particular the northern and far eastern ranges as well as the high altitude regions, lower parts of the mountain areas are living spaces for millions of people that are extremely ethnically and culturally diverse. A large number of different language groups inhabit these mountain regions, such as Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Abkhazians, Chechens, Ingush, Daghestans, Avars, Circassians, Karachays and others in the Caucasus, Pamiris, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Wakhs in the Pamirs, or Yakuts, Chukchi, Koryaks and Itelmens in the Far Eastern mountains (cf. Badenkov 1992; Stadelbauer 1996).
- 8 Subsistence farming through *Almwirtschaft* or mixed mountain agriculture with fixed settlements and farming land in mountain valleys and seasonal movements to spring, summer and autumn pastures at higher altitudes was the traditional livelihood strategy in the East European Mountains and the Caucasus (Mkrtumian 1979; Fox 2011; Kligman, Verdery 2011). The mountain terrains of Central Asia, on the other hand, were mainly used for animal husbandry by nomads and semi-nomads (Bezkov 1969; Schmidt 2013). Moving from one place to the other, normally from winter pastures in the lowlands to summer pastures in upper regions in search of grasslands for their herds, played a central role in this form of mountain nomadism. Mountain nomads and mountain farmers, however, became workers in state or collective farms during the socialist era. This has changed the form of economic activities tremendously; the recent forms of land utilization, farming and herding activities in the mountains are the subsequent legacy.
- 9 Within the process of modernization settlements were founded or extended, and urbanization happened to a significant extent, not only at the foot plains of large mountain ranges, as Almaty, Bishkek or the cities of the Fergana Valley indicate, but also to some degree within the mountains; the most prominent examples being Tbilisi or Yerevan with histories that date back more than a thousand years. However, the rate of urbanization in the Eurasian mountains is relatively low and most probably will not increase in the future; the population prospects are rather negative with many people leaving the mountains.
- 10 In almost all Eurasian mountains, through urbanization but also in conjunction with the abundance of various mineral resources, processes of industrialization can be observed. In particular, mining operations for ferrous and non-ferrous metals as well as fossil fuels are widespread while factories for processing raw materials are more concentrated in or near urban agglomerations (Hughes 2012).
- 11 In the 19th century tourism had already started in the Slovenian Alps, the High Tatras and the Carpathians but only began in the mid of the 20th century in the Caucasus and Tian Shan, mainly in the form of governmental planned and organized tourism (Stadelbauer 1996). For more than a century the high peaks were destinations for alpinists and mountaineers, although the density of alpine tourists is much lower than in the Alps, Pyrenees or Rocky Mountains.
- 12 Certainly, all the mentioned characteristics and diversities are not unique features and do not differ principally to that of mountain regions located in other parts of the world. So,

what are the particularities of Eurasian (post)socialist mountains that make them unique, at least different, to other mountain ranges?

- 13 Arguments to answer this question are to be found in history and politics; the major differences of the post-socialist mountains when compared to other mountain areas are related to historical developments and political decisions. In any case it is important to note that these processes not only influenced social or economic aspects but also physical and ecological structures. Landscapes, rivers and slopes, flora and fauna, settlements, urbanization and industrialization as well as societies and individual livelihoods in these mountains were influenced and transformed to a great extent by the 'socialist experiment' that lasted for seven decades in the Soviet Union and for around four decades in other Eastern European countries
- 14 With the overthrow of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, not only were political reforms introduced, but the profound transition processes that followed changed the economic systems, societies and environments. These transformation processes were not limited to urban areas but influenced even the most remote regions, not stopping at the foot of the mountains. The creation of new states and new borders was accompanied by territorial disputes, even armed conflicts as in the Caucasus, and by the disturbance of previous exchange mechanisms which increases the economic burden for mountain communities.

Figure 1: Location of mountain ranges in northern Eurasia



M. Schmidt, 2016.

Post-socialist transformations in mountain areas of Eurasia

- 15 Papers produced for this issue deal with current structures and transformation processes and socialist legacies in the fields of natural resource management, forestry, pastoralist activities, property rights, migration and tourism. The regional focus is on the Caucasus, the Tian Shan and the Carpathians. It became obvious that a crucial aspect in relation to environmental management is the lack or weakness of institutions that followed the collapse of the old party regimes. Consequently, most papers have a particular focus on persistent, restructured or malfunctioning institutions and their limitations, as well as on the new opportunities for activities connected to them.
- 16 *Alexey Gunya* investigates land reforms and their impact on land management in 14 villages of the Northern Caucasus and shows how the end of the state monopoly on land property resulted in the emergence of various forms of land management. With the dissolution of state and collective farms in the 1990s, political power and governance was delegated to the local level. As a consequence, regionally diverse forms of formal and informal institutions and a plurality of actors have emerged. Gunya argues that political factors, such as the level of centralization, political power and economic liberalization as well as natural conditions and social factors of the specific communities, are responsible for the construction and implementation of land reforms. He identifies five different village types in respect to land ownership, distribution and management, and shows arising conflicts and institutional weaknesses.
- 17 Decentralization of natural resource management became a major task and strategy in almost all former Soviet Republics. The erosion of governmental powers and the weakness of national governments have led to major reforms and the shifting of power to regional and local spheres. *Jesse Quinn* focuses on this trend and its societal consequences by looking at alpine forest governance in Georgia. He analyzes the political, economic and environmental interrelations present at various scales. As in other post-Soviet states, the Georgian governmental policy oscillates between centralization and decentralization. Quinn argues that these practices, as seen through the governance of alpine forests, produce a distinctly fractured form of democracy and mirror the political transformation of post-Soviet states and their state formation.
- 18 In the 1990s, the Kyrgyz Republic became an experimental ground for reforms following the so-called Washington Consensus – economic liberalization and democratization – developed by Western Think Tanks. In consequence, political and economic reforms were implemented. For the mountain populations the foundation of local Pasture User Associations as part of the governmental decentralization strategy is highly significant. In their paper, *Aiganysh Isaeva* and *Jyldyz Shigaeva* show that these newly established pasture governance institutions are still considerably influenced by the legacies of the socialist planned governance systems. Following the theoretical approach of path dependency and on the base of empirical studies in Kyrgyzstan's Naryn Province, they argue that Soviet style decision-making processes and modes of implementation still influence current pasture management institutions. Thus, practices, meanings and power hierarchies from the socialist era are steadily reproduced.

- 19 The community-based pasture management system in Kyrgyzstan is also the focus of the paper by *Irene Mestre*. She analyses the impacts of mining activities on mountain communities and shows the close interrelationship between mining and animal husbandry; income from mining activities is predominantly invested in livestock. Consequently, this additional income opportunity means that mountain dwelling agro-pastoralists who are not involved in mining activities have less access to decision-making processes and are at risk of becoming marginalized. Mestre sees no obstacle in the coexistence of high income generating activities, such as mining and agro-pastoralism, for community-based pasture management, but instead argues that this could even lead to functional improvements in community-based management of natural resources.
- 20 Migration processes are a very important phenomenon currently taking place in the Eurasian mountains (Schmidt, Sagynbekova 2008). While many regions are characterized by outmigration processes, the opposite trend can also be found. In the Romanian Carpathians, amenity migrants and tourists from urban areas now influence the mountain areas, as is shown in the paper by *Andrea Membretti* and *Bogdan Iancu*. Using a qualitative research design, they analyze the role of amenity migration and tourism as drivers of change and their influence on the physical and cultural landscapes. They see such movements both as threat and opportunity for post-socialist mountain areas which faced demographic and socio-economic crises throughout the last decades.
- 21 The post-socialist mountains of Eurasia are dynamic living spaces. Several of the sketched processes are similar to those found in other mountain areas of the world, such as outmigration, economic transformation or the conflict laden interrelationships between resource exploitation, agro-pastoral activities, tourism and conservation. But differences stated can be related to institutions, insecurity and fragility: The legacies of the socialist era still confront the population of the Eurasian mountains. As long as the ideas and practices of socialism continue to influence human-environment relationships, social interactions and daily routines and are reference points for individuals it remains necessary to consider post-socialism as an important category for understanding the human geography of Eurasian mountains.

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